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Whitney Warren

The Role of the Italian Navy in the Great War

A LECTURE GIVEN AT THE COLONY
CLUB, NEW YORK, JANUARY 22, 1920

By

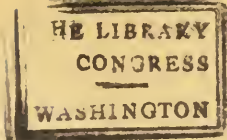
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1920

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It was my privilege during the war to have had many acquaintances amongst the Officers and Crews of the Italian Navy, to see them at work and to be in their confidence. It is a great pleasure to attempt in a few words to give an idea of the arduous task they were called upon to accomplish and the masterful way in which they carried it out.

Throughout the war a new role was assigned to the Navies of the World. They had an irksome task to perform consisting chiefly in watching and escorting the Allied troop ships and merchant marine. Volumes could be written, concerning the work and romance of the mine sweepers and little submarine chasers, yet the spectacular side is lacking and even our American Navy only got a glimpse of a periscope, now and then, as it performed its mighty task across the trackless wastes of the Bay of Biscay and the North Sea.

To the Italian Navy was allotted a role, which, while also quite devoid of the spectacular, was most important; and yet, as upon land, so upon the sea, for some unknown and short-sighted reason, we Americans ignored our Italian Allies; for months, after our entry into the war, none of our Naval Chiefs even went to Italy to confer with those charged with watching and conducting the war in the Adriatic. Only at the end of the war did there come a vague realization that the Adriatic was the key to the whole problem of beating the Central Empires, for, once the Austrian Fleet destroyed, it was only a matter of days for the Austrian Army to be forced to fall back to Vienna; this was proved by the final outcome; thus the way through Italy and the Adriatic turned out to be, as it always has been, the back way, and the **only** way, to reach Berlin.

In considering what the Italian Navy actually accomplished, let me first call attention to the fact that while not an island, Italy has as long a coast line as any other country of its size, and therefore in despite of an absence of many natural ports, the Italians have been always, perforce, a seafaring people from the earliest days — not to the extent, perhaps, of the English but always to the extent of their needs.

The Italian Navy dates from the time Rome fought Carthage—then, as to-day, the Italian interests lay in the Mediterranean Sea, for throughout 2,000 years Italy has been purely

a Mediterranean power. Unlike Spain, England, France and the United States, she has only had a passing interest in the Atlantic and other oceans. Italian safety in the Mediterranean has always depended upon the control of the Adriatic, and it was to regain this control, quite as much as to get back her natural physical boundaries on the north that Italy came into the war.

From the day Italy came into the war until the end, I have often heard a malicious remark to the effect that—"all the Italians want is to make the Adriatic another Italian Lake." Well, if the Adriatic is not to be an Italian Lake, it will be, as it was during the war, a German Lake! The Allies learned this at a tremendous cost. Now we have an opportunity to say to whom it shall belong, and it would seem a wise and safe policy to leave it in the care of our friends rather than to give it back to our enemies of yesterday, who, in all probability, will be our enemies of to-morrow.

The maritime traditions of the Italians have been kept alive through all centuries since the Roman Empire. I have but to recall the names of Venice, Genoa, Pisa, and Amalfi to bring up memories of glorious days.

Long before Britain possessed an Official Royal Navy, Italian ship builders were world renowned. When Henry VIII laid down the foundations of the British Navy, as we know it, he invited Italian Ship Constructors to give him the benefit of their experience and advice. Coming down to the comparatively modern navies, it is for over 60 years, that Italian Naval Constructors have been amongst the first to adopt new armoured devices. Ever since then they have been pioneers in all matters concerning naval construction and design. Italy was first in the field in combining the qualities of the modern man-of-war, namely, heavy armour, heavy guns and great speed. As long ago as 1874 she built battle ships 400 feet long, of 16,000 tons displacement, with armament of four 100 ton guns, protected by 19 inch armour—and steaming at 18 knots. At that time the biggest British ship was the Inflexible only 320 feet long, with 11,000 tons displacement carrying four 80 ton guns—and steaming at but 14 knots.

Again, the first idea of the modern dreadnought was given by the Italian Naval Constructor Cuniberti in 1903, when he published an article, concerning what he called, "The Ideal

Ship," armed with only big guns and it was four years later, in Portsmouth, that the original dreadnaught was laid down embodying his suggestions.

I cite these matters to show that all Navies owe **much** to Italy from the imaginative point of view as far as navy construction is concerned, and, if we take into account the formidable fact that an Italian invented the wireless, we should have a definite idea, that, in the matter of modern seafaring, we are in great debt to our Allies the Italians.

When Italy entered the war in 1915, the Navy, true to its traditions, took to the open sea and used every known strategy and inducement to persuade or beguile the Austrian fleet to come out and give battle—these efforts were absolutely fruitless, the enemy remaining concealed behind its fortified ports, and resulted only in the Italians loosing many of their units by submarine and mine warfare. Tactics had to be changed and for those of noble tradition were substituted those of the submarine and the spadassin.

In order to arrive at their ends the Italian naval technique inaugurated many notable conceptions. Take for instance the closing of the Adriatic by a steel net to prevent the passage of German submarines into the Mediterranean. In comparison with the feat accomplished in the English Channel where the breadth was less than 20 miles and the greatest depth but ten fathoms, the Italians had to swing a net across the Strait of Otranto, a distance of 40 miles and a maximum depth of 600 fathoms. Nevertheless in 142 days, the net was finished and the first enemy submarine was captured.

The Italians are also responsible for a new arm of naval warfare which gave most brilliant results—that is to say, the armed motor launches which became known in Italy by the initials M. A. S.

The M. A. S., as a unit of attack, was evolved from the special conditions which existed in the Adriatic. The Austrian fleet remained in hiding in its refuges on the opposite side of this sea, and, while it would not come out and give battle with the Italian dreadnoughts, it was, none the less, a terrible menace. It soon became apparent that the only way to destroy this fleet was to **dig it out**. It was therefore necessary to invent a weapon able to enter the Dalmatian ports and attack the ships there. Admiral Thaon Di Revel, Commander in Chief of

the Italian Naval Forces, gave a laconic order to build craft for this purpose using the expression, "and the smaller they are the better."

And so was born the M. A. S.

These motor launches were only from 12 to 30 tons displacement, armed with two torpedoes hanging on davits, but controlled by hearts of steel, ready to strike at close quarters, even as the Arditi of the trenches who use the dagger as their weapon.

The difficulty in constructing these boats lay in the motor. It had to be extremely light, very powerful and absolutely silent. When the Italians finally solved the problem, the first launch achieved the speed of 25 knots to the hour. This progressed until at the end of the war they covered over 35. These launches cruised the Adriatic, keeping the enemy navy in constant alarm, to such an extent that enemy officers when questioned during the Armistice, admitted, that every night around the mess table would be heard the words, "What Will Happen Tonight?" and something always did happen!

These tiny but insidious Italian units entered all the ports, captured the guards and soldiers, left papers and proclamations, telling the Italians of Istria and Dalmatia to wait patiently and with faith, for the hour of their liberation.

They sank ships of all sizes, from dreadnaughts to submarines. The regions of Durazzo and San Giovanni Medua became cemeteries for Austrian ships. Beneath the waters of the inner port of Triest is buried the battleship "Wien"; near the island of Premuda was sunk the dreadnought "Szent-Istvan," while in the inner port of Pola lies the dreadnought "Veribus Unitis."

This is all the work of the Italian M. A. S. The motto suggested for them by Gabriel D'Annunzio was, "Momento Audere Semper"—remember to dare always—and this they have lived up to. No enemy port escaped attack.

The first harbor to be entered was Trieste. Accompanying the expedition as pilot was Nazzario Sauro, an Italian from Istria, who some months later, taken prisoner by the Austrians, was hanged at Pola, guilty only of the desire that his native soil should once more be united to its Mother Country.

On the night of June 9th, 1918, two M. A. S. under the command of Luigi Rizzo were cruising along the Dalmatian

coast, seeking any enemy's ships which might pass that way, under the cover of darkness. Nothing had been seen and dawn was beginning to break. Rizzo decided to return to his base—Ancona. He was tired from the long watch, and sat in the stern of his launch, his head resting on a life belt, but with his eyes still open. The motion of the launch made his head roll from side to side and presently he became vaguely conscious of, rather than saw, something which aroused his curiosity upon the horizon. In a few moments he became convinced that it was smoke from several ships, and he thought at once that this must come from enemy destroyers, sent out to hunt for him, as, during the night, he had been very close to the shore and had probably been seen by sentinels. He thereupon ordered the bow of the launch turned towards the destroyers and prepared for attack. It was an audacious act, for the light was increasing with the dawn.

As he approached, he discovered to his joy and surprise, that in the group of the ten advancing destroyers, were the silhouettes of two great dreadnoughts. He did not hesitate to play for the largest stake. In order to be able to attack his victim, it was necessary for him to pass the file of destroyers which surrounded it. This he succeeded in doing, lying very low in the water, as he did, and when he was near enough to the first of the great vessels, he launched his two torpedoes striking amidship; two enormous explosions followed, the ship listed and sank shortly afterwards. Immediately a destroyer turned and gave chase to Rizzo's launch, firing at him with its bow chaser; with rare nerve he slowed down, and, waiting until the destroyer was upon him, he let go two depth charges into the sea. The destroyer badly shaken by the explosion refused to follow further, and Rizzo continued his course towards Italy, entering the port of Ancona with his colors flying to tell the people that another enemy ship had been sunk.

Another most daring feat, was the sinking of the second Austrian dreadnaught "Veribus Unitis," which was accomplished during the last days of the war, by Major Rossetti and Lieutenant Paolucci. This particular act was the result of the third attack that the Italians had made against the fortified port of Pola. The first was accomplished in November, 1916, by Commander Goiran with a M. A. S. of the ordinary type. He succeeded in entering the outer harbor, and having searched

for a long time for the largest ship, launched two torpedoes against an armed cruiser, but unfortunately without result as the torpedoes did not explode.

Lately I had the pleasure of making the voyage from Pola to Venice on a destroyer in company with the commander. He carried in his pocket, the two unexploded caps of two torpedoes, which he had found at the arsenal at Pola together with a description of his act in writing. Both torpedoes struck their mark but failed to explode owing to some imperfection.

The second attack on Pola was made by Commander Pelligrini in May, 1918, with a special and very cleverly imagined type of motor boat which can be called a "naval tank." It was constructed in such a manner that it was able to climb the barriers protecting the harbor, this by means of a series of hooks fastened by chains, on the principle of a caterpillar tractor. Pelligrini was discovered after he had climbed three barriers, of the seven, which protected the harbor, and fire was opened upon him by the guns of the forts and the ships; he was forced to destroy his launch and was made prisoner.

And so, in order to pass these extraordinary defenses, it was necessary to imagine even something more ingenious. Rossetti and Paolucci invented it! What it consisted of, is a mystery: but what is certain is, that no modern means of defense is capable of resisting their invention.

By patient work they succeeded in passing all the barrages and entered the inner port. At dawn they recognized the Admiral's ship; they approached, and fifteen minutes later the "Veribus Unitis" and another ship anchored close to her went to the bottom.

The Navy which possesses such men as these launch commanders and their crews, ever ready to employ the means furnished or imagined by them, is a Navy whose weight thrown in the balance of the European War could make it turn only to the advantage of the Entente.

Another very difficult task accomplished by the Italian Navy was the saving of the remnants of the Servian Army in the winter of 1915-1916. It has also turned out a thankless job, for the Servians have forgotten, very conveniently, what happened at that time.

This transporting of all that remained of the Serbian Army—driven to the sea by the enemy and lacking all materials—

was a hard and perilous work that the Allies asked of Italy. All the operations were in winter and from open roadsteads at a very short distance from the formidable enemy base of Cattaro. In four months the work was done—260,000 Serbians and 10,500 horses were carried to safety without the loss of a single Serbian life. It should not be forgotten that the French and British collaborated in this work but to a limited extent.

During the war, the 23 battleships, the 14 light cruisers, the 50 destroyers, the 103 torpedo boats, the 75 submarines and the 263 auxiliary ships which formed the naval forces of Italy accomplished 87,000 war missions with a total of 1,900,000 hours of being actually under way. The percentage of time passed at sea was 71% for the escort units, 58% for the destroyers and 35% for the submarines, this figured by trimestre.

Naturally, in consequence of such activity, the Italian Navy had to suffer losses. Its balance sheet showed at the end of the war, 5 battleships, 1 light cruiser, 8 destroyers, 6 torpedo boats, 8 submarines and 18 auxiliary ships lost. In the mercantile fleet the loss was even much greater, being 58% or considerably more than half of the total tonnage of the country's commercial fleet.

The result of all this sacrifice, effort, patience and daring, resulted in the utter destruction or surrender of the entire Austrian naval forces, and the annihilation of the commercial fleet.

To-day Italy has frankly considered her program of reconstruction and has taken up the work in spite of all the difficulties confronting her, such as the absolute lack of materials and above all of coal. She has faith in the star which has ever guided her and in the genius of her race which has never been in default.

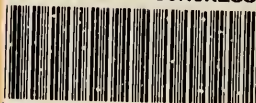
And now I feel it my duty to a Loyal Ally, to ask you, if, in view of the toll Italy has paid, do we Americans not owe her something; for, be it remembered, we were at war with Austria-Hungary, a great and powerful enemy, for almost one year actually, and 18 months practically, as we did not declare war on Austria-Hungary, for some mysterious reason, at the same time we did on Germany. You have heard the losses of the Italian Navy in this war. The American losses on the Italian maritime front were none. On land, Italy lost 500,000

or half a million of men killed, and many more than 1,000,000 wounded. This would indicate that there had been some **real** fighting. Incredible as it may seem, our losses on land on the Italian front in this mighty war, were, one man killed and 15 wounded. When one knows these facts and one knows the guarantees Italy is asking for, guarantees so necessary to her safety, it would appear that at least we ought to see that it return for the physical sacrifices she has made, not to speak of financial, **Justice be done here, and that she be allowed to protect herself behind her natural and necessary boundaries, both on land and sea, so that she may feel at Home and at Peace, even as we Americans feel at Home here, with the Atlantic (not to speak of Great Britain, France and Italy) between us and our ever to be enemies!**





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